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SUBJECT: TACKLING SEX TOURISM IN NOSY BE, ROUND TWO

REFTEL: (A) 06 ANTANANARIVO 091
(B) 06 ANTANANARIVO 088
(C) 05 ANTANANARIVO 680

11. (U) SUMMARY: Embassy staff traveled to Nosy Be, an island off Madagascar's northwest coast notorious for its growing sex tourism, and Diego Suarez, a nearby port on the mainland, to follow up on Embassy Antananarivo's 2005 report on the nature of sex tourism and trafficking in persons (TIP) along the northern coast of Madagascar (refs A and B). This is the first of two cables that will report their findings. This report provides a more in-depth look at the root of the problem in Nosy Be, as well as Post's recommendation for future TIP programs. The second cable outlines Post's initial assessment of the same issues in Diego Suarez. END SUMMARY.

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NOT MUCH HAS CHANGED
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12. (SBU) Little has changed in the overall landscape of sex tourism in Nosy Be over the course of a year. While the average cruise boat tourist can take his pick of professional prostitutes complete with business cards and a clean bill of health, it is more common to see foreigners upwards of 50 years old openly fraternizing in the streets, beaches, and dance clubs of Nosy Be with girls as young as 13 years old. The euro is king, which places most pleasures Nosy Be has to offer, whether benign or illicit, easily within the grasp of European retirees and tourists. Their options range from one-night trysts with minors picked up in nightclubs to having a live-in "concubine" during a several-month stay on the islands. Compensation ranges from jewelry and nice dinners to cash, all of which blurs the distinction between dating and prostitution. In a place with few economic alternatives, almost every sector of society is involved with the tourism industry and touched by the sex tourism problem.

13. (U) Some young girls travel to Nosy Be of their own volition from the neighboring region of Sophia after hearing their friends' stories of opportunities for a better life. There is no known organized trafficking network to or in Nosy Be itself. Contacts categorically denied that anyone in Nosy Be, adult or child, is being physically forced to work or denied the liberty to leave their situation. Most of those involved in prostitution do so -- independently -- for economic or status reasons. However, it is not uncommon for parents, taxi drivers, tour guides, and hotel workers to act as third parties in linking prostitutes to their tourist clients. And with a significant number of these workers being underage, they qualify as sex trafficking victims.

14. (U) In a new development, Embassy representatives noticed a

growing number of male victims of sex tourism. Several contacts facetiously mentioned the phenomenon of "djombile" (Malagasy gigolos, both adults and minors) posing as the "chauffeurs" or "cooks" of expatriate women. Interlocutors seemed more disturbed by the growing problem of adolescent Malagasy boys prostituting themselves to older male tourists. Their case differs from that of girls in two main areas. Whereas young girls usually start prostituting themselves as young as 10 years old, boys start around the age of 15. Also, parents do not encourage this behavior in their sons due to societal discomfort with homosexuality -- "it's a family scandal." Tour operators and taxi drivers occasionally link male prostitutes to their clients, but interlocutors believe the adolescent boys generally act on their own.

TESTING THE WATERS IN AMBATOLOAKA

15. (U) To better understand the problem, we visited nightclubs in the beach town of Ambatoloaka, known to be the epicenter of Nosy Be's sex tourism. In the low season for tourists, bars boasted up to ten Malagasy girls for every foreigner. In every nightclub visited, a few gray heads bobbed in a sea of young girls. Scantily clad Malagasy as young as 14 years old competed on the dance floor for the attention of potential "boyfriends." A number of 15-year-olds clad in high heels and purses flitted between the dance floor and prospective male clients hovering at the bar. Assuming Political Specialist was PolOff's mother, an elderly Italian tourist approached her to negotiate a price for her "daughter" for the night. His blatant proposition was sad confirmation that negotiating publicly with parents for their children is not uncommon in this part of Nosy Be.

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THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM

16. (U) Government officials, NGO representatives, and educators differed on the root of the problem, offering the following explanations:

KEEPING UP WITH THE JONESES?

17. (U) In a society where snagging a foreign boyfriend or husband has become synonymous with "making it," many young girls seek out sexual relationships with foreigners to improve their social status. They see the material goods their older peers have gained from dating and wedding foreigners and aspire for the same lifestyle. Noting that relaxed sexual mores are part of the general culture in Nosy Be, a local teacher pointed out that some women and girls relish the level of economic independence prostitution provides.

PARENTAL ENCOURAGEMENT?

18. (U) Almost every contact mentioned the role of parents in "encouraging" their children to seek out foreigners, whether for dating, marriage, or prostitution. Interlocutors disagreed on the extent of parental pressure, ranging from passive involvement (not saying anything when their daughter comes home wearing expensive jewelry) to active involvement (entering a night club with their daughter to scope out potential "boyfriends"). Local church leaders related anecdotes of girls whose mothers threatened to kick them out of the house for wanting to marry a Malagasy and not a foreigner. In the bleakest cases, some of which made it to court, parents negotiated a price with foreigners to live with their daughters for up to several months. Much of this pressure is thought to stem from the cultural belief that children must take care of their parents. The money a girl brings in helps ensure the family's financial security.

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FOR LOVE OF "QUICK MONEY?"
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¶9. (U) A number of interlocutors attributed the sex tourism problem to a cultural laziness and preference for "quick money." Church leaders elaborated that the spirit of "donia" -- "I will do whatever I feel like doing" -- dictates life in Nosy Be to a great extent, especially among the poorly educated. The mayor and French Consul pointed out this mentality is why people choose income-generating activities with a quick turn-around, such as selling embroidery on the street and prostitution, to jobs with a monthly salary. With many schoolchildren lacking textbooks and electricity, and having to walk up to 13 kilometers to school, it is no wonder many opt out for an easier solution in the short term.

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CORRUPTION?
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¶10. (U) Claiming that "money talks here," the mayor asserted that the sex tourism problem will be around as long as low-level corruption continues to plague local institutions, from the police and gendarmes up to the "chef de district" (the local representative of the president-appointed head of the region). The French Consul explained how foreigners can easily pay the chef de district's office to arrange visas, the police to avoid being arrested, or magistrates to avoid going to court.

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LACK OF ECONOMIC ALTERNATIVES
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¶11. (U) Our conclusion is that Nosy Be suffers from a "hub and spokes" problem. While every one of the aforementioned issues certainly plays a role in the rampant sex tourism problem, each originates in the fundamental poverty in Nosy Be. With the closure of the SIRAMA sugar factory in 2006 and a slow-down in hiring by the one active fishing company, economic alternatives are scarce in what is one of the most expensive areas of Madagascar. The French Consul affirmed that no companies want to invest in a place with poor road systems, inconsistent energy supplies and a poorly trained labor force. Local authorities hope the government and international financial institutions will agree to fund large-scale development

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projects to attract investors, but they have seen little movement on their proposals over the last few years. Options for post-secondary education are nonexistent, and though we met with a number of highschoolers dreaming of careers in medicine and biology, they quickly pointed out that their parents cannot afford to send them to university on the mainland. Many cannot even afford the cost of schoolbooks and uniforms for primary education on the island.

¶12. (U) In this context, it is no wonder that parents and their children latch on to the hope of finding a foreigner who can provide a more comfortable life. Similarly, with the average civil servant's monthly salary of 60 USD per month consumed entirely by rent and the cost of rice, it is no wonder local officials show leniency to foreigners in order to pad their pockets. The newly appointed Police Commissioner expressed to us that after trying to survive on his meager salary in Nosy Be for just a few months, he is starting to understand why civil servants must seek "activities on the side" just to get by.

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ENFORCEMENT AND PROSECUTION EFFORTS
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¶13. (U) Despite a law barring minors from night clubs, the owners of such establishments rarely turn away underage Malagasy for fear of losing their foreign clientele. Short-staffed and under-funded, the police can only inspect nightclubs for minors once per month depending on the availability of the sole vehicle shared between 50 officers. Similarly, judges and police lack the funds and resources to inspect hotels for minors. Night club inspections usually result

in a warning to the owner, but police hesitate to close establishments for fear of the economic impact on the town. Regardless, people are finding ways around such enforcement efforts. Children as young as 12 years old have been caught with false identity cards, and the closure of a local nightclub has instead seen the rise of a weekly beach party known as "Boom Beach" popular with underage Malagasy and foreigners alike.

¶14. (SBU) A local judge explained the obstacles making it rare for even one or two cases of pedophilia by foreigners to make it to court every year. Most parents -- some of whom negotiated the original contract with the foreigner for their child and only filed a complaint after being cut off financially -- prefer to settle cases of child prostitution and even rape privately for as little as USD 300. Foreigners can often "arrange" with the police or magistrates to be released for a small fee. The judge admitted these cases are especially delicate, as a five- year prison sentence in Madagascar's deplorable prison conditions could cause a death that would lead to a diplomatic incident. The judge also recounted numerous cases where parents of minors challenged police and judges following the arrest of a foreign pedophile or the closure of a local nightclub, saying, "Now that you have taken away our source of income, it is your job to feed my children." In the rare instances where mothers were arrested for pimping their daughters, they expressed confusion at being punished for taking care of their family. The chronic lack of resources to take proactive prosecution measures against foreigners, such as pursuing those who take minors out on their boats, have rendered the authorities somewhat passive: "We have learned these complaints will arrive at our office." He concluded, "Nosy Be is a desperate case."

¶15. (U) Despite such obstacles, 2006 was an above average year in Nosy Be with the arrest of three European pedophiles. Two French men were convicted and expelled from the country, while a Swiss man is currently serving a five-year prison sentence.

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ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM
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¶16. (U) There are a number of efforts in place to address different aspects of the sex trafficking problem in Nosy Be. UNICEF is conducting awareness-raising campaigns at schools through 2015. A state-managed social services center conducts door-to-door and radio awareness-raising campaigns to convince parents and children of the importance of staying in school. A private Italian citizen established 90 free educational establishments for children. Police from the Minors Protection Brigade are posted around local schools at closing time to discourage taxi drivers from recruiting students for their clients. The government's independent anti-corruption bureau (BIANCO) has established a confidential drop-box to register complaints of local corruption.

¶17. (U) In an effort to coordinate such efforts, UNICEF convened a
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stakeholder meeting in early 2006 to bring together government officials, law enforcement authorities, local NGOs, the private sector, and parents to draft a Nosy Be Action Plan; however, participants have seen no money or implementation since. A government official jokingly referred to Nosy Be as a "cemetery for projects -- we have lots of action plans but never any money to implement them." Our group meeting with many of the same stakeholders confirmed there is no lack of passion about the need to address the situation, but there is a fundamental lack of capacity, communication and resources that frustrates even their smallest efforts to organize educational workshops for parents. Participants also expressed the frustration that there is a tendency in Nosy Be to avoid taking responsibility for project implementation, so "at the end of the day, it's no one's fault" if something does not get done.

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COMMENT
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¶18. (SBU) Given the complex nature of sex tourism in Nosy Be, assistance programs could choose to target any one of a number of "pressure points." Embassy representatives noticed the tendency of government and international TIP programs to focus on awareness-raising initiatives. While these have made incremental progress to date, Post believes they will not be effective in the medium-term without parallel efforts to address the root of Nosy Be's problem -- the lack of economic alternatives. Local interlocutors, including senators, NGO leaders, and magistrates, argued, "Everyone has had awareness-raising. Plenty of NGOs have been doing that. At this point, we need economic alternatives even more." Campaigns to raise awareness among parents and children, increased efforts to prosecute tourists, and even initiatives to root out corruption will go nowhere if the residents of Nosy Be continue to struggle to make ends meet every day.

¶19. (SBU) COMMENT CONTINUED: While the large-scale infrastructure development needed for private sector investment and job creation is admittedly the job of the government and international organizations, other initiatives to facilitate income-generation such as vocational training, the creation of hotel study institutes, and small business grants would also go a long way in generating employment and income alternatives. In a place where educational options are few and costly, scholarships are also sorely needed to encourage children to continue their education. As Madagascar continues to await TIP funding promised in 2005 (REF C), Post recommends future TIP projects consider the need for programs to provide economic and educational alternatives alongside traditional awareness-raising activities. END COMMENT.

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